

Communicating with young carers via text and Facebook



What is the initiative?

Connecting Young Carers

Who runs it?

Highland Community Care Forum

Who does it benefit?

Young carers across the Highlands.

What does it do?

Connecting Young Carers gives support and information for young carers via text messages and Facebook. Young carers can chat with and ask for help from the Connecting Young Carers Participation Worker by texting and using the message and chat functions on Facebook.

When did it start?

2010.

Why was it started?

Connecting Young Carers is an advice and information service covering approximately 8,000 square miles of the rural Highlands. As it can take several hours to make a round trip to visit a young carer it is not always possible for staff at Connecting Young Carers to meet face to face with the carers they support. Social media and texting was seen as a solution to engage with and provide support to a larger number of young carers than would otherwise be possible.

What are the aims and objectives?

Aims:

- To provide support and information to young carers.
- To enable young carers to disclose issues that might be troubling them.

Objectives:

- To provide an accessible and discreet service via text and social media.
- To run a low-cost yet high-impact additional service.
- To communicate with young carers in a way they feel comfortable with.

How is it funded?

Communicating with young carers through Facebook and text message is very low cost to run and is not costed for by Connecting Young Carers. Connecting Young Carers is part of Highland Community Care Forum, which is funded by Highland Council, NHS Highland, independent funding trusts and its own charity shop.

What has it achieved?

“It’s a good way to communicate with the young carers who we can’t reach and see on a regular basis and it allows them to feel like part of our network of young carers. It has also been helpful in reaching young carers in distress who didn’t want to talk about things on a face-to-face basis and may not have been picked up on otherwise.”

Participation Worker

The service is well used, with around 80 young carers using either the texting or Facebook communication within a year. At the time of writing, Connecting Young Carers had 42 young carer friends on Facebook.

On average, the Young Carers Participation Worker will be in contact with one young carer through text or Facebook every other day. It is a very low level intervention that takes up little time. By communicating by text and through Facebook, Connecting Young Carers has been able to provide prompt support and reassurance to young carers at a minimal cost.

Texting is also used by Connecting Young Carers to organise activities for the young carers it supports. This has proved an easy and cost-effective means of administration in terms of getting information about times and transport details to young carers, especially those in more rural areas. Texting is particularly useful for late changes to plans. Additionally, texting and mobile phone calls have been a means for the Participation Worker to answer queries from the young carers and their parents. Consent forms and details of activities are still sent out by post, but texting is an additional and often faster and more popular means of communicating information about plans.

There have been instances where young carers have disclosed issues such as self-harm, and it is believed that the wall that social media and texting provides has enabled young carers to reveal these personal problems more than if they were speaking to staff face to face or on the telephone. In these cases, Connecting Young Carers has been able to get other appropriate agencies involved and provide support to help the young carers in need.

Another similar success story is that of a shy young carer agreeing to be paired with a mentor from the project which she initially was not willing to do when she first started talking to the Participation Worker on Facebook. As a result of the mentoring, this young carer set mini goals and targets for herself, which she met and eventually became a more confident young person and went on to college to study further.

How have carers been involved in delivering and planning this work?

So far, young carers have not been greatly involved in planning or delivering this initiative. At the moment, Connecting Young Carers is considering involving older young carers as volunteer online mentors for other young carers. This idea has come from young carers who have left Connecting Young Carers since they reached the age of 18, but would like to give something back to the service.

How is the initiative run?

During office hours the Young Carers Participation Worker is always logged on to Facebook and has her mobile phone at her desk. Texts and Facebook messages are responded to within an hour. The initiative demands little time and is very low cost, yet it can make a big difference to young carers.

All of the young carers supported so far have added Connecting Young Carers as a friend on Facebook, in order to use the direct messenger to chat or post messages on Connecting Young Carers' timeline. If young carers do not wish the fact that they are friends with Connecting Young Carers to be visible, then they can still access the service on Facebook by sending inbox messages to the Connecting Young Carers account. There is also an email address which young carers can use if they want to talk to the Participation Worker at Connecting Young Carers but cannot access Facebook.

If a safeguarding issue is disclosed by a young carer on the internet or text, then Connecting Young Carers has procedures in place to provide appropriate support for these young carers. Referrals may be made to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Guidance Teachers or Children's Services Workers. Before a referral is made, there will be a discussion with the young carer asking them what they want and informing them what will happen if a referral is made.

What methods have been particularly effective?

The wall that technology such as social media and texting creates between users has been particularly effective. Young carers have been able to talk to a Participation Worker, but in comfortable, familiar surroundings and without having to talk face to face with an adult they do not know very well. It is believed that a greater number of personal problems have been disclosed by young carers than if the Facebook and texting functions did not exist.

Have there been any challenges along the way?

There have been cases where young carers under the age of 13 have lied about their date of birth to get Facebook accounts. The Young Carers Participation Worker

now checks the date of birth of young carers requesting to be friends with Connecting Young Carers on Facebook against the Connecting Young Carers database to make sure they are over 13. Young carers of any age may use the texting service.

In the early days of offering text and Facebook communication, messages would be exchanged at any time of day. However, this became constant and it was decided it could be dangerous if distressed young carers tried to seek help from the service when Connecting Young Carers could not guarantee a prompt response. A decision was then taken to limit the service to office hours. This is made clear to young carers on the Facebook page and young carers are encouraged to identify an out of hours social worker, mental health team or trusted friend that they can turn to in an emergency.

What hints and tips might help get me started?

- Be sure you know what level of service you can realistically provide and make the availability of the service clearly known to young carers from the start.
- It might be worth investing in a text service that can send auto-replies out of hours, perhaps directing young carers to a social worker or service such as Childline.

Are there any useful documents or resources that could assist me?

Find **Connecting Young Carers on Facebook**.

Visit **Highland Community Care Forum's website**.

You may want to consider using a computer-aided texting service like those provided by **GlobalMessaging.co.uk** or **TextAnywhere.net**.

Where can I get further information?

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